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# Is there an Ibero-American 'Youthology'?

## A conversation

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### Abstract

This article reproduces a conversation between Carles Feixa and Maritza Urteaga, researchers in youth studies, whose paths converge in the critical study of contemporary youth culture. Carles Feixa, PhD, is Professor of Social Anthropology at the Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona) and holds a Doctorate Honoris Causa from the University of Manizales (Colombia). He was previously a lecturer at the University of Lleida, and has been visiting scholar in Rome, Mexico City, Paris, Berkeley, Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, Newcastle and Lima. He has also been a public policy consultant for the United Nations and VP for Europe of the "Sociology of Youth" research committee of the International Sociological Association. In 2017 he was awarded the ICREA Academia Award by the Autonomous Government of Catalonia and an Advanced Grant from the European Research Council. Maritza Urteaga, PhD, is Research Professor at the National School of Anthropology and History in Mexico City, and a level II member of the National System of Researchers in Mexico. This conversation reviews Feixa's career, from its beginnings in the 80s to the present, to determine whether there is something that can be called Ibero-American 'youthology'.

### Keywords

Youth Studies. Iberian Peninsula. Latin America. Youth Cultures. Youth Movements. Gangs.

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## A conversation

### 1. Introduction

In March 1991 the Catalan anthropologist, Carles Feixa, who was then a postdoctoral visiting scholar in Mexico, gave a seminar on the anthropology of youth cultures at the *Centro de Antropología y Estudios Avanzados en Antropología Social* (CIESAS). It was at this seminar that Maritza Urteaga, Peruvian anthropologist based in Mexico, first met the Catalan researcher. At that time Urteaga was doing fieldwork on rock music and youth identities and in the following years Feixa and Urteaga collaborated together and with their contemporaries, promoting what can be called the *Ibero-American school of youth studies*. This conversation is possible due to the network that began to develop from that first meeting. It reviews Feixa's professional trajectory and his confluences with other researchers in youth studies.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. Predestined by Hebe?

MARITZA URTEAGA CASTRO POZO (MUCP): Carles, you play a very relevant role in the field of youth studies in Spain and in many Latin American countries, we could even say that you have promoted a tendency: ‘youthology’.<sup>2</sup> When I met you in 1991 you already had a promising theoretical and methodological interdisciplinary and qualitative proposal for studying youth culture. In your doctoral thesis you researched the oral history of Catalan youth during the Franco era, and prioritized looking at youth cultures from different angles considering their spaces and times. The Mexican intellectual climate in the social sciences in the 80s was already undergoing paradigm shifts concerning the importance of culture in social life and the "return of the subject" as well as the emergence of new social actors in the cities, including the Mexican gangs: *chavos banda*, *clicas* and *gangas*. In this context, your proposal was well received. It made a critical assessment of the scientific knowledge accumulated during the twentieth century in Europe and the United States on the subject of youth, with unknown authors for the researchers who were starting to study street youth cultures. The seminar you gave at the CIESAS was a determining

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1 Although the authors have spoken many times in person, this dialogue was carried out by virtual means.

2 By this neologism we understand an imagined community of scholars, policy makers and youth workers, dedicated to youth research (in this case in the Ibero-American context), through common readings, academic meetings and personal exchanges.

event because it connected the researchers of the new generation. That is where I, and others like Rossana Reguillo, met you. From that moment I see two focusses in your career: to constitute a field of youth studies and nurture this field with researchers from Spain and Latin America. It was therefore necessary to convert your personal academic links into collaborative projects and open the dialogue on the youth subject through networks of researchers. The axis of my interview revolves around these two focusses, but first, tell me: Why did you decide to study young people?

CARLES FEIXA PÀMPOLS (CFP): Perhaps my fate was predestined by Hebe, the Greek goddess of youth. The year I finished my degree, 1985, was declared the International Year of Youth by UNESCO and this had a large impact both in Spain and Latin America. I was 23 and had been an active member of various youth organizations, such as Young Christian Students, similarly to other youthologists like Néstor García Canclini and yourself, the Conscientious Objectors' Movement and the Youth Council of my city, Lleida, from which we promoted a youth survey. When I went to study at the University of Barcelona, I was chosen as a member of the National Council of Youth of Catalonia, which brought together very active social and political organizations during the transition from Francoism to democracy. Thanks to this I participated in international exchanges and the World Congress on Youth that UNESCO organized in Barcelona that year. As an anthropologist I considered doing my degree thesis on more traditional subjects, like peasantry or nationalism, but I requested two scholarships in my city to study youth and I was granted both of them. This meant that I could immerse myself completely in my fieldwork. In reality it was actually a kind of spontaneous autoethnography because I was researching my own generation. In Spain that was the generation of the crisis, marked by the disappointment after the end of the dictatorship, but also by the emergence of urban tribes, a topic that became crucial in my career.

### **3. Youth as a metaphor**

MUCP: The institutional and quantitative visions of youth were predominant both in Spain and Mexico at the beginning of your doctoral research. The first books you wrote reveal a diligent young man constructing a more inclusive concept of youth based on diverse literature disciplines with a strong ethnographic component. Why did you consider it necessary to make a critical review of schools and authors?

CFP: In 1984 two Catalan sociologists published a book criticizing the youth surveys, which until then had been the only way of researching youth, for their 'naive quantitativism'. This convinced me that it was necessary to approach youth with qualitative methodologies and to base my work on theory. Thanks to the scholarships I received I spent two years reading everything I could get my hands on, from Margaret Mead to Pierre Bourdieu, Ortega y Gasset to Stuart Hall. I have yet to publish a book that rescues the evolution of contemporary social thought based on the idea of youth, which would complement the anthology *Teorías sobre la juventud: Las miradas de los clásicos* (2008) edited by other youthologists.

MUCP: Your books, *De jóvenes, bandas y tribus* (1998a) and *El reloj de arena* (1998b) are bestsellers in Latin America and clearly show your progress in the conceptualization of youth cultures. For many Latin American youthologists of the previous generations these books are essential reading at a methodological level. How do you consider these works and their successful reception among Latin Americans?

CFP: These books are like twin brothers, they were born in the same year (1998) from the same parents – Papa theory and Mama ethnography – in two different cots – Catalonia and Mexico. But their gestation did not take nine months, it took nine years. In 1989 I had finished my doctoral thesis and in 1991 I immersed myself in studying a youth gang, Mierdas Punks, a group you had introduced me to, and for which I am eternally grateful. I analysed both field experiences based on readings from a few years earlier, especially William Foote Whyte, Jean Monod and the Birmingham School. When I returned from Mexico I dedicated myself to teaching and after a few years I decided to use these materials to write the two books you mentioned. Luckily I met two interlocutors who believed in the project: the Catalan anthropologist Joan Prat, who introduced me to the editorial Ariel publishing, and the Mexican sociologist José Antonio Pérez Islas, who you introduced me to and who connected me with the Mexican Institute of Youth. That the two books had so much resonance, and still have twenty years later, is perhaps because they came at the right time: the emerging Latin American youthology was searching for its own theoretical and methodological references that were not based on the Anglo-Saxon or French worlds, and my books acted as a sort of astrolabe to guide navigation in this search.

#### **4. Is there an Ibero-American ‘Youthology’?**

MUCP: Your professional efforts in Spain led you to consolidate the youthology current in the Ibero-American sphere. Can you define the youthologists?

CFP: The classic term for the study of youth is ‘Hebeology’, the science of youth. It has a psychological focus and is very adult-centred. After 1985 researchers emerged who were more focused on the social, although at first they were very fragmented and dependent on the institutional. Almost fifteen years later, there began to be a critical mass of independent academics and researchers studying youth and who forged links with each other: these researchers are the youthologists. For me, the term includes all the actors that participate in the *magic triangle* that connects youth researchers, youth politicians and youth workers, which unfortunately in Latin America often becomes a *Bermuda triangle* when research is replaced by stereotypes, social work by paternalistic surveillance, and policies by police.

MUCP: You promoted the development of collaborative networks between Mexico, Central America, Colombia and Ecuador as well as other networks in Europe. How does the network of youthologists connect?

CFP: More than a network it's like a spider's web, a skein of reticulating connections linking the three galaxies in which I participated and which were unconnected: the Iberian galaxy with its centre in Barcelona and composed by Catalan researchers like Quim Casal, Spaniards like Jorge Benedicto and

Portuguese like José Machado Pais; the European galaxy, with its centre in Brussels, articulated around the ISA Research Committee "Sociology of Youth", with the participation of Lynne Chisholm and Carmen Leccardi, with whom I have collaborated since then; and the Latin American galaxy with its centre in Mexico, articulated around our colleague and friend José A. Pérez Islas. I think a key moment was the seminar in Ixtapan de la Sal, Mexico in 1998. José Antonio invited a small group of Latin American youthologists to discuss the theoretical and methodological foundations of the Mexican National Survey of Youth, including Rossana Reguillo, José Manuel Valenzuela and you from Mexico, Carlos Mario Perea from Colombia, Sergio Balardini from Argentina, and Ernesto Rodríguez from Uruguay, among others. There was not only a theoretical complicity, we also became friends and in the following years we continued to meet up throughout Latin America, and we still do today. We share certain traits: A critical approach to youth as a historical and cultural construction, a focus on youth gangs and cultures as a research laboratory, the use of mixed methodologies with an emphasis on ethnography, an interest in violence and social movements, a politically committed dimension of the research, an interest in having an impact on the public policies concerning youth, the attempt to construct an epistemology of youth from the south, etc. After 2000 a new generation arrived who had access to other sources, and who participated from the beginning in international networks as well as published in leading journals on youth: *JOVENes* in Mexico, *Revista de Estudios sobre Juventud* and *Metamorfosis* in Spain, *Revista Última Década* in Chile and *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud* in Colombia, *Estudio* in Cuba, among others. One of the things that I feel most proud of is that I have contributed to training the third generation of youthologists and that I have directed many doctoral theses. Without the contributions of people like Germán Muñoz, Yanko González, Maricela Portillo, Oscar Aguilera, Inés Pereira, Carmen Flores and a dozen young researchers who made short research stays under my supervision, my career as a youthologist would surely have ended much earlier or would have become obsolete.

## 5. Glocal Youth?

MUCP: You study global youth phenomena but your research is also anchored in the local, like the concepts you discuss in your book *De la generación@ a la #Generación* (2014). From Lleida to TRANSGANG, have you become a global youthologist?

CFP: I think that I have always been a very *glocal* youthologist. I always start from the local, from young people's life stories, like the stories of the stroll down the main street and the Mexican colonies, but at the same time I try to situate these local stories in global narratives. Young people were one of the first social groups to become globalized, and so studying youth culture, more than an object in itself, is really a pretext for studying the transformations of society. This is the central idea of my first book, *La juventut com a metàfora* (1993). Outside Latin America I'm mainly known for the book I co-edited with the Australian sociologist Pam Nilan, *Global youth? Hybrid identities and plural worlds* (2006), which takes a non-Eurocentric approach to the transnationalization of youth culture. I coedited another volume with Nilan and Leccardi inspired by the same glocalist conception: *Youth, Space and Time* (2016). My

current project, TRANSGANG,<sup>3</sup> is a study of transnational youth gangs in twelve cities in southern Europe, North Africa and Latin America. I always say that the elixir of eternal youth has already been invented: it is to be a youthologist, because the youthologist must always be awake and attentive to the new phenomena. Now I also have two privileged informants at home: my children Xao (16 years old) and Iago (23 years old). Thanks to them I keep up with the latest news on youth culture in the digital era. With them I travel every day from generation@ to the #generation, and back again.

MUCP: We can say, therefore, that an Ibero-American, and not just Latin-American, ‘youthology’ is currently consolidated, which studies emerging youth themes and actors concealed in contexts of violence and precarious living conditions. It is composed of national, local and translocal networks of several generations of youthologists and is fostered through projects and themes, so that youthologists work collaboratively to power the forge of collective ideas and a different intellectual climate – new theoretical methodological consensuses – for studying young people with more complex analytical dimensions in physical and virtual realities.

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